

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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The word “sabbath” is central in today’s readings. It’s a word that drips with religiosity and is rarely used elsewhere. In fact, most religions have some kind of “day of rest,” even if they don’t describe it as a sabbath. The essence of a sabbath is to have one day a week to abstain from work focused on benefits for the individual. In the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, we learn that over time the Israelites defined what was considered inappropriate on the Sabbath – including things like cooking, trading, plowing and reaping, gathering wood, and loading animals.

Knowledge of a sabbath is key to understanding today’s reading from Mark. There, we heard of two instances where Jesus worked on this day of rest. We discovered that the Pharisees caught Jesus disobeying the law. The first instance was when Jesus’s disciples gathered food to suppress their hunger, and the second was when Jesus healed a man whose hand had atrophied or wasted away. Here’s where the controversy takes place. The religious leaders caught Jesus breaking the law twice. Then, the leaders brought Jesus’s criminal activity to his attention, but Jesus did not plead guilty. Instead, Jesus argued that they have turned the gift of a Sabbath into a legalistic avenue devoid from its original intention. So, what was the original intention? Well, let’s take a look at the first reading.

Our reading from Deuteronomy mentions the sabbath in what is also known as the fourth commandment. In Confirmation class, I had to memorized all ten commandments. When they made us memorize it we only had to recite the first part of verse 12 – that is, “remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.” Yet, the sabbath is described in greater detail if we keep reading. It reminds us that we shall work for six days and take a sabbath on the seventh. But, the sabbath is not just for us and our families, but also for those who work on our behalf – both humans and animals. This includes refugees, migrants, immigrants, and foreigners. So, as I re-read this commandment as an adult, I realize that intention of the sabbath is to be a gift for all people. It is intended to be a life-giving benefit for those of us who already have the luxury to take time off *and* for those of us who often work every day to make ends meet. The sabbath is about protecting the most vulnerable who are likely to be abused with constant work. It is a Biblical argument for a living wage that allows the poor to partake in a day of rest. You see, the sabbath is God’s law to bring about fullness of life for all of humankind.

Yet so often we, like the Pharisees, get caught up in letter of the law and forget the spirit of God’s law. We sometimes find ourselves at the extremes of God’s command for a sabbath. On one end, we might choose to ignore the sabbath as we seek power and pride in the busyness of our status-driven culture. And, we wear that medal of productivity in an attempt to mask our soul-sucking existence. At the other extreme, we become overly legalistic about the Sabbath. We think that if we grasp this instruction without exception, even to the point of ignoring or abandoning the needs of our neighbor, that we will be vindicated by preserving ourselves at any cost. At this extreme, we prioritize our own need for rest while intentionally allow 13 million U.S. children to go hungry every night.¹

¹ <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/child-hunger-facts.html>

You see, on both ends of the sabbath spectrum – that is, with complete avoidance or with overzealous legalism – we miss God’s intention. It’s like the preschool soccer coach who forgets the purpose. He’s swearing at the referee. She’s benching the child who picks flowers. They’re working on complex moves and demanding perfection. You see, this type of coach has forgotten the point of preschooler soccer. At three years old, soccer is much more about having fun, socializing, getting some exercise, and exhausting the child for their parents. Sure, the game has rules, but legalism in this case does not bring joy or life to the team.

So too, Jesus reminds us today in Mark 2:27 that “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” Jesus reminds us that all the laws given by God were created as a gift to humanity. Yet, one of the more popular theological beliefs in modern Christianity is that we were created to do nothing more than fulfill God’s rules. With that outlook, God is chiefly known as holy, and humans have to achieve a level of holiness to be acceptable to God. This, then, manifests itself as a “requirement” to baptize or go to church and it leads to the destructive guilt prevalent in Christianity. Yet, we oh so clearly see that the Jesus of Mark offers us an alternative theology. A theology where God is chiefly known as love and where laws and rituals are gifts for our own good. These laws and rituals offer us a way to respond to God’s grace with gratitude found in the abundant life we receive.²

So instead of worshiping the ogre of obligation, we gather here to be reminded of God’s gifts. In baptism, God reminds us that instead of being self-centered we have a God of abundance who pours out life-giving water to re-center us in God’s freely-given gifts. Each week at this table, God gathers us in our diversity and differences to celebrate God’s lavish gift of community while

² <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/05/putting-sabbath-in-its-place.html>

strengthening us to serve our neighbor in love. For our faith is not about the letter of the law, but rather it is about the spirit of God's abundant gifts.

So, my friends, there it is: today we remember that a balanced view of the sabbath is a gift from God. It's a gift that reminds us that God desires a full life for us and for all people. While we often worship status, money, busyness, and pride, God's sabbath saves us from ourselves. And, so too, the sabbath empowers us. It encourages us to care for the poor and vulnerable by advocating for systems that justly provide God's sabbath. Friends, we've been given a divine gift. Let us journey into the world, working for peace, striving for justice, and seeking the life-giving sabbath that our God bestows on all people. Thanks be to God! Amen.